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Fear of appearing 'too Jewish'

By Avi Weiss

Only after it was subjected to the discomfort of having protest flyers distributed outside one of its gala dinners by the Washington-based organization Holocaust Museum Watch, did the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum see fit to post on its Web site a statement denouncing the genocidal threats by the president of Iran to wipe Israel off the map. Tepid at best, the museum's statement comes too late and is far from enough. Its primary follow-up, to date, has been its incorporation by the museum into its latest fundraising drive.

Such timidity with respect to the politically sensitive Muslim world fits into a pattern already established at the museum's inception. While the museum's permanent exhibit includes a film linking the Holocaust to the centuries of Catholic Church anti-Semitism, there is no mention at all of the role of Islam, specifically the close alliance between the mufti of Jerusalem and Hitler. Nor is there any hint whatsoever of the effect of the Holocaust on Jews in Arab countries, in North Africa and the Middle East, which, while not as consuming as in Europe, was still considerable and worthy of note.

As far as genocidal threats to Jews and Israel are concerned, the museum is practically in a state of paralysis, horror-stricken at the possibility of appearing "too Jewish." There has long been a debate within the museum as to whether it should devote itself exclusively to the Shoah, or whether to universalize its message to encompass other genocidal acts. Whatever one's position on this issue, however, since the museum has already spoken out in a comprehensive way against genocides in such places as Darfur and Rwanda, it must now also speak out forcefully and fully against genocidal threats directed at Israel. Holocaust history, well within the museum's mandate, teaches that before Hitler acted, he threatened. The museum now has a sacred obligation to take very seriously the threats of the Iranian leader. It must raise a strong voice of moral conscience by leading a worldwide movement to lobby governments, convene conferences and educate the public.

That it has not done so is the result of its leadership's unwillingness to alienate U.S. government officials, particularly when it comes to matters pertaining to Jews and to the delicate balance of Middle East politics. The museum, after all, is a hybrid. On the one hand, it is officially dedicated to pure Shoah memory; on the other hand, it's a political institution. In its own way, it is a part of the U.S. government, the beneficiary of over \$30 million of federal funds annually. It sits on land donated by the federal government. Its leadership is appointed by the president. The consequence of all this is that political demands made on the museum are very often in conflict with its established mission of Shoah remembrance and education.

The very creation of the museum was fraught with politics. In 1978, President Jimmy Carter was vigorously lobbying Congress to approve his proposed sale of F-15 fighter planes to Saudi Arabia. Those concerned with the welfare of Israel were deeply distressed with the president's plan of selling sophisticated weapons to a country so hostile to the Jewish state. Three weeks prior to the approval of the sale, the Carter

administration invited 1,000 Jewish leaders to the White House to celebrate the 30th anniversary of Israel's establishment with the president and Prime Minister Menachem Begin. It was at this event that Carter announced "a presidential commission to report to [him] on an appropriate memorial in the United States to the six million." The commission, which ultimately recommended the creation of the museum, was clearly meant to appease the Jewish community, which was effectively being given the Holocaust at the expense of the security of the State of Israel.

Perhaps the greatest politicization of the six million by the museum occurred in 1998, when Miles Lerman, then chairman of the museum's council, agreed to a State Department request during Middle East peace negotiations to escort Yasser Arafat on a public relations visit of the museum in order to render the Palestinian leader more acceptable to the American Jewish community. Museum director Walter Reich advised against the visit on the principle that the museum, and the dead it memorialized, should never be used as an instrument to promote any political agenda. Lerman disinvited Arafat - then under pressure from the State Department, reversed and re-invited him. When Reich was asked to escort Arafat on a tour of the museum, he refused, and resigned in protest. In the end, Arafat chose not to come; the Monica Lewinsky story broke on the day scheduled for his visit, and the press was busy elsewhere.

Clearly, the hottest political button for the museum involves Jews and Israel, and it has already been burned. Yet having already overstepped the strict interpretation of its narrow mandate of Holocaust remembrance and education to take on matters of conscience such as world-wide genocides, how can it in good conscience refuse to deploy its full moral force against a threatened genocide of Jews and Israel? Its presidentially appointed council, made up primarily of Jews, may, not surprisingly, find it easier to speak out on universal issues, which carries relatively little risk and brings the acclaim of the larger community. But speaking out with equal intensity on behalf of Jews who are once again being threatened with genocide touches upon insecurities and a heightened sensitivity to the perceptions of others - insecurities and sensitivities that Diaspora Jews have acquired and absorbed over the years.

Because museum leaders have, until now, refused to respond to these criticisms, we are turning to Congress, which approves the funding of the museum. While we have no interest in interfering with museum funding, its officials must be held accountable. Remembering the Shoah, while neglecting to raise a voice against those bent on another Shoah, is morally unconscionable.

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